



Director of
Central
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Nicaragua: Implications of the Military Buildup

Special National Intelligence Estimate

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NICARAGUA: IMPLICATIONS OF THE MILITARY BUILDUP

Information available as of 15 November 1984 was used in the preparation of this Estimate, which was approved by the National Foreign Intelligence Board on that date.

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The Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, and the intelligence organization of the Department of State.

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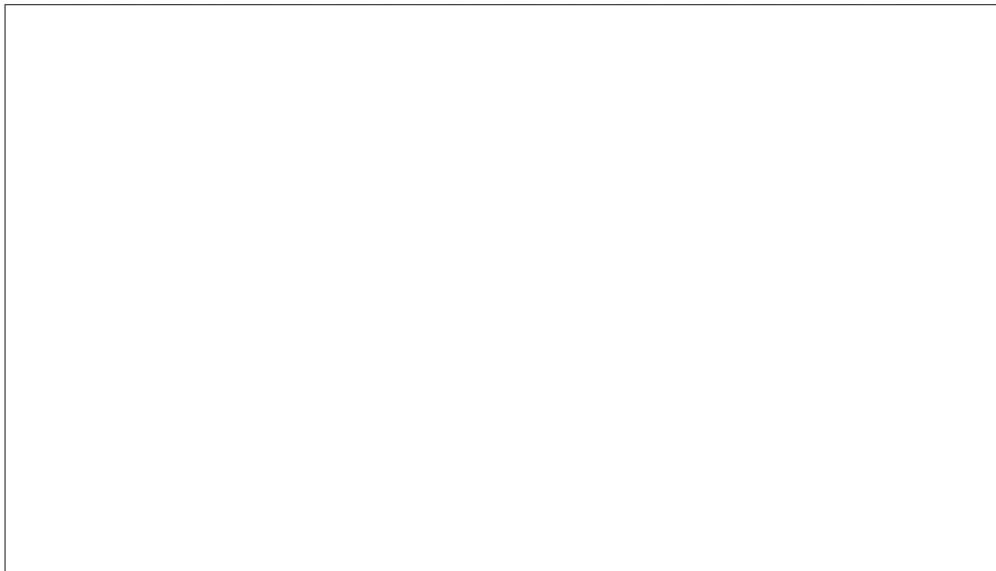
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25X1

CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
KEY JUDGMENTS	1

25X1



Page Denied

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25X1

KEY JUDGMENTS

Over the last five years, the Sandinista regime has embarked on a major military buildup [] primarily with substantial Soviet Bloc and Cuban assistance. As a result, it has developed the largest and best equipped military force in Central America, with an active-duty strength of nearly 60,000. The ground and air defense forces are predominant, while the air and naval forces are small and poorly equipped. []

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The overall buildup is primarily defense oriented, and much of the recent effort has been devoted to improving counterinsurgency capabilities. The buildup has nevertheless upset the regional military balance and represents a growing potential threat to Nicaragua's immediate neighbors. As in the case of Cuba, it also provides a shield behind which the Sandinistas can continue to consolidate their regime and support other regional revolutionaries. []

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The arms buildup has accelerated during the last year. The Soviet Union this month delivered a major weapon system—the MI-24 helicopter gunship—directly to Nicaragua for the first time. This action has important symbolic implications and represents a Soviet decision to play a more direct role in strengthening the Sandinista regime. During 1984 the inventory of tanks and armored vehicles has doubled, and the basis has been laid for a significantly improved air defense system. A fully integrated system, however, appears several years away. []

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Although US demarches appear to have so far deterred the delivery of MIGs or other advanced jet aircraft, the Sandinistas remain determined to acquire them. In the interim, the likely acquisition of advanced surface-to-air missile systems and other air defense improvements eventually will provide a protective umbrella for future deliveries of additional weaponry, potentially including combat aircraft as well. []

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The some 3,000 Communist military and security personnel in Nicaragua, predominately Cubans, play a key role in supporting and maintaining the Sandinista armed forces. This role is likely to increase in the future as Nicaragua obtains more sophisticated weaponry, making Managua yet more dependent on Moscow and Havana. The recent arrival of the MI-24 helicopters may presage a concerted new military campaign against the anti-Sandinista insurgents. Should Cuban pilots covertly operate the aircraft, they would assume their first known direct combat role in Nicaragua. []

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We believe that the USSR seeks to use military assistance to consolidate the regime in Managua and to establish a center of Soviet influence on the Central American mainland. From the Sandinistas' perspective, Soviet and Cuban aid serves to raise the costs to the United States of a major attack and enhances their ability to defend against lesser threats. We believe that Moscow will continue to probe the limits of US tolerance for delivery of additional weapon systems, including jet combat aircraft, much as it has done in Cuba. ☐

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The Nicaraguan military buildup serves other Soviet and Cuban interests as well. It diverts US attention and resources from other critical areas and complicates US force planning. It ensures a key base for the support of other regional insurgent and terrorist groups and intimidates Nicaragua's neighbors. By assisting in the consolidation of a Marxist-Leninist government, it encourages other leftist movements in the region. Such consolidation, moreover, may provide the Soviets the opportunity to establish secure intelligence collection facilities, especially for SIGINT, as well as access to Sandinista air and naval facilities. ☐

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The Sandinistas have indicated they would be willing to accept a Contadora Treaty that would limit the military buildup and the number of foreign military advisers in the region. In doing so, they seek the removal of US military bases and schools from Central America and an end to US military exercises. They clearly hope to use the treaty to further legitimize the regime and to end any foreign interference in their domestic affairs that would hinder political consolidation. Nevertheless, they are resisting the inclusion of effective verification measures, and will continue to support a clandestine Cuban military presence and provide material aid to regional insurgents. Should the treaty process fail, they are likely to continue their military buildup unabated.¹ ☐

25X1

¹ The Director, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of State takes exception to the sketchy treatment of the Contadora process. A complex and on-going process is treated as a static phenomenon and only from the perspective of the Sandinistas' sudden tactical acceptance of a particular treaty draft with little or no discussion of the crucial issues of verification, democratization, and the kinds of limits or reductions that might be forced on the Nicaraguan war machine under varying Contadora scenarios. Additionally, it fails to deal with the attitudes of our Central American friends and with the varying positions of the Contadora Four, all essential to understanding the Contadora contingencies as they play out against the Nicaraguan arms buildup. ☐

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